

# Alluring Aviator

**Maria Finazzo becomes only the fifth woman to attain the rank of captain with Hawaiian Airlines**

By KATHY TITCHEN

She wanted to be an actress, but now enjoys applause for smooth landings.

"It's not the stage," says Maria Finazzo of her job as a Hawaiian Airlines captain, "but sometimes it feels like it. It's a rush when you make an especially good landing and the passengers clap and cheer."

Finazzo, who just passed a battery of tests to earn the rank of captain, has been flying for more than 20 years. The last 13 have been with Hawaiian, the airline her father once ran. She worked her way up from second officer on interisland turboprop aircraft to co-pilot on the DC-10.

Now as a neophyte captain, she's back on interisland flights, commanding a DC-9 to the neighbor islands instead of the DC-10 trips to Las Vegas, Tahiti and the West Coast that she flew as co-pilot.

"As a new captain I'm at the bottom of the bid list," Finazzo laughs, referring to the system by which pilots and flight attendants bid each month for flight schedules. They are assigned according to seniority. "I'll be working weekends and holidays for a long time to come, but that's OK."

Even as the 21st century approaches, Finazzo is a rarity in a career dominated by men.

Of Hawaiian's 350 pilots, 15 are women. Five are captains. Finazzo has joined a select group of

Hawaiian Airlines women — Maureen Barnes, Kiki Emery, Marian Kuzma and Leslie Todd — who occupy the left seat of a cockpit.

Finazzo is the first to admit she didn't exactly come up the hard way. As the daughter of Paul Finazzo, Hawaiian's president from 1982 to 1989, she had an inside track on employment. Along with dozens of other young pilots, she was hired during the airline's rapid expansion from a sole interisland carrier into Mainland and South Pacific routes.

"A year after I finished college, Hawaiian devel-

oped its expansion program," she says. Her parents had moved to Honolulu from Miami when her father took the top job here. Maria stayed behind to finish her degree, making the family home in Coconut Grove a virtual dormitory of the University of Miami. Flying was always a way of life for the Finazzos. Dad, now retired

in Miami, was a commercial pilot, who filled top management jobs with several companies at the later end of his career. Maria's mother, two brothers and two sisters all learned to fly, and Maria had her private pilot's license at 18. Her younger sister, Paula, is a flight attendant with Hawaiian.

Maria has a vivid memory of flying her two grandmothers, aged 87 and 90, from Miami to Boca Raton soon after earning her license.

"They came aboard," she said, "these two elderly Sicilian ladies,



Photo courtesy of Maria Finazzo

In addition to being a pilot, Finazzo has also had a modeling career

clutching their rosary beads, and just sat there looking down, not saying a word. It was their first time ever in a small plane and their first time being flown anywhere by their granddaughter. They were brave, bless their hearts."

Her father was a taskmaster, and regularly climbed into the aircraft to grade her

takeoffs and landings. "He insisted I had to do it just as well as my older brothers," she said. "Takeoff and landing are crucial — especially takeoff — because that's when accidents are most likely to happen, not when you're cruising."

Even in college she flew for the small charter airline, Finair (later renamed Southern Express), founded by her father and two older brothers, Nick, an attorney, and Vince, now a captain with United Airlines. A drama major in college, Maria worked for the company while in school and continued to pilot the company's 10-seat Navajo Chieftains after graduation. Gambling parties to the Bahamas were popular among the well-

heeled Florida crowd. "When they won I got nice tips," she reminisces. At the same time she tried to break into modeling and acting. Disillusionment set in. Acting in college meant Shakespeare, Chekhov, Ibsen and Tennessee Williams. In the real world of Miami it meant humiliating "cattle calls," sporadic commercials (Mahatma Rice, Jefferson Jeans), an occasional movie walk-on (*Scarface*) and bit parts on *Miami Vice* ("usually a couple of lines while slinking across the screen in a bikini").

"My goal then was to become an actress," Finazzo says now, "but I don't think I had what it takes to deal with all you have to put up with, or withstand all the rejections. I hated cattle calls and didn't take rejection well."

Piloting airplanes began to look like a better career choice. If being a Finazzo helped Maria land her entry-level job with Hawaiian as a DASH-7 turboprop co-pilot, whispers of nepotism had a downside. "I felt I constantly had to prove myself," Maria says. "It's like that [for women] in any male-oriented field anyway, but it was even harder knowing people felt I got the job only because I was the boss's daughter."

Having the face and body of a pinup girl didn't contribute to a serious image in the quasi-military culture of airline pilots either. Finazzo recalls being embarrassed when a



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